

2003



APPLEBY ARCHAEOLOGY



Appleby Archaeology Group held its AGM on the 14th January. This meeting was followed by a member's evening when Tricia Crompton spoke on Environmental Archaeology on Shetland. Tricia has recently completed a degree in bio-archaeology at Bradford University and has spent time excavating in Shetland where her research involved environmental studies of a late medieval crofting township.

The site, Old Scatness, is on South Mainland about a mile from Jarlshof. Slides showed the proximity of Shetland to Norway and Iceland and this influenced the trade routes and culture of the Islands. The northern latitude means that the growing season is short and the islands are subject to severe winds and sand blows. This can lead to the land being covered in sand as occurred at Old Scatness.

Before discussing her environmental work Tricia gave an overview of the site where excavation started in 1995. The first indication of the site was when the edge of a broch (a circular dry stone tower) was clipped during the construction of a road to the airport in the 1970s. The site is described as being multiperiod and there is evidence of occupation from 100BC to 1960. A recent discovery of a peat layer beneath the Iron Age broch may confirm even earlier occupation. The broch and the surrounding wheelhouses (circular houses with partition walls like the spokes of a wheel) are the most prominent remains but the site is complex and there is evidence that the buildings and stone have been reused over the centuries.

As the archaeologists dig down through the layers of occupation each location or context

is carefully recorded, photographed and any finds labelled for each phase or period. The excavation is using a range of modern techniques to date and to learn more about the lives of the people who lived there.

One approach is to use environmental archaeology and Tricia's study was to compare the historical records with the botanical data from a crofting township which was in the uppermost layer of the site and dates from the 17th century.

A botanical survey was carried out and samples were taken from middens (rubbish heaps) and from soil around and within partially extant buildings. In her study Tricia analysed the seeds from 31 different contexts, identifying the type and number of seed found. Other plant remains, such as charcoal, heather and seaweed, were also assessed. She described how this was done emphasising that she had counted over 5000 seeds!

The results showed that early in the 17th century the crops were cleaner and more prolific than later when there were more weeds and poorer crops. In the 17th century the predominant crop was oats but not as much was grown as the researcher anticipated. This could have been because the crops were cut green and so that the seeds were not preserved, or because they were exported, although there is no documentary evidence to support this. In the 18th century the crops were mainly of oats and barley with a small amount of wheat but by the late 18th and 19th century the crop was mainly barley. In the earlier years the soil was good but as time went on there was more sand and less manure to a point where the soil could not support grain growth.

These results were compared with historical evidence obtained from a number of sources including family papers, wills and reminiscences of visiting gentry. From these sources two significant events were highlighted; there had been a deterioration in the weather in the 18th century described as the Little Ice Age, with an increase of wind blown sand causing a deterioration in growing conditions. This correlates with the decrease in crops in the later periods. In the 19th century the lairds from the Scottish mainland claimed

more land and the crofts became smaller. As a result fewer crops would be grown and this again correlates with the botanical evidence of a further decrease in grain crops in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries.

Tricia concluded by saying that any results had to be carefully interpreted. Not all seeds are preserved and the samples are not fully representative and conclusions made have to be considered with other evidence from the soil samples such as bone remains, and artefacts. It is hoped that the findings will help the understanding of farming practices on Old Scatness and will be used to compare with evidence from other sites.

A number of questions were taken before Tricia was thanked for interesting and well illustrated talk.

On February 4th at 7.30pm in the Supper room Market Hall Appleby P.C. Earl from Appleby Police will speak about the Time Team investigation at the old jail and how it all came about. ✓ visitors are most welcome.

Phyllis Roustron 20/01/2003